Northern - reflecting passenger needs and expectations in a new contract

A submission from Transport Focus, December 2019

Introduction

The Northern franchise is in crisis. We understand a new contract must be negotiated and implemented, either with the current operator or through an Operator of Last Resort (OLR).

A complex backdrop of interlinked issues creates a challenging context.

Ongoing performance failures have eroded passenger and stakeholder confidence in the operation. There is extensive media and political interest in the problems on the network and widespread calls for action. However, given the extent of problems and multiple challenges, including financial and infrastructure constraints, there is little prospect of easy or immediate solutions.

The path back to equilibrium will be slow and testing, whoever has responsibility for delivery.

As the independent watchdog for Britain's rail passengers, Transport Focus welcomes the opportunity to provide a passenger perspective on the current and future challenges. This paper amplifies points made in initial discussions and identifies the following priority issues as the next steps for the franchise are considered.

Key issues

Punctual and reliable services must be restored as soon as possible. This may require tough choices about a strategy to 'stop the rot' and stabilise before longer-term solutions can be identified and implemented.

Information provision needs to be significantly enhanced, particularly at times of disruption. Proactive communication with passengers can help people make informed decisions. Significant improvements to real-time information provision at stations and through direct communications are needed. Passengers should not set off for their journey, or stand at stations, unaware of issues that will disrupt their plans.

Build public and political trust and confidence. This will partly be dependent on addressing the performance problems but, from the outset, requires a new level of candour and transparency, combined with clearly articulated explanations and a plausible and effective strategy to be set out.

Additionally, sincere apologies from *all* parties involved should be made for the preceding months of pain and problems. There is a need to demonstrate the impact of these difficulties on individual consumers is genuinely understood. Industry must communicate, engage and consult more effectively. It is often not only unclear to passengers if or how their interests have been considered, but also often which industry bodies are involved and their roles in decisions affecting them.

All communication channels must be aligned and responsive. As well as a much-improved engagement strategy with all external audiences, there is a need to ensure that staff are informed and engaged and supported in what has become a highly charged and challenging work environment.

Evidence base

Passenger priorities for improvement clearly show the importance of the core rail product.

More trains arriving on time, less frequent major unplanned disruptions to the journey, fewer trains cancelled, less disruption due to engineering works, sufficient frequency and train company keeping passengers informed about delays are all in the top eight priorities, along with value for money and ability to get a seat.

Passenger satisfaction, measured by the National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS), demonstrates that current performance is less than satisfactory on a range of factors. Overall satisfaction with Northern stands at 78 per cent, five points below the sector average for regional operators

Data for spring 2019 shows significant decline in 10 measures including; punctuality and reliability, frequency, length of time the journey was scheduled to take and connections with other train services.

Northern

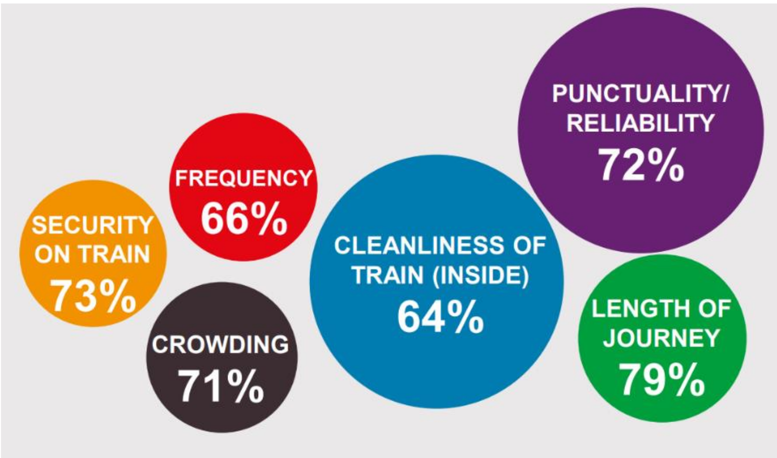
Improved ↑ Unchanged → Declined ↓

Overall sample size: 1514	Improvement/decline in % satisfied or good since Spring 2018		Improvement/decline in % satisfied or good since Autumn 2018		Spring 2019				
	% change	significant change	% change	significant change	sample size	% satisfied or good	% neither/nor	% dissatisfied or poor	TOC type % satisfied or good
Overall satisfaction with the journey	-2	→	6	↑	1409	78	13	9	83
STATION FACILITIES									
Overall satisfaction with the station	-1	→	2	→	1481	79	14	7	79
Ticket buying facilities	-5	↓	1	→	945	76	15	8	80
Provision of information about train times/platforms	-4	↓	2	→	1449	84	10	6	84
Upkeep/repair of the station buildings/platforms	-6	↓	-6	↓	1455	69	18	13	71
Cleanliness	-4	↓	-4	→	1463	73	18	9	75
Toilet facilities at the station	-2	→	-1	→	989	44	17	39	45
Attitudes and helpfulness of the staff	-3	→	0	→	1062	78	15	7	80
Connections with other forms of public transport	1	→	4	→	943	70	14	15	72
Facilities for car parking	4	→	-2	→	614	56	15	29	54
Facilities for bicycle parking	3	→	-1	→	426	65	18	17	66
Overall environment	-3	→	0	→	1465	73	17	10	74
Your personal security whilst using the station	-4	→	-2	→	1343	70	24	6	73
Availability of staff at the station	-2	→	1	→	1226	66	18	16	69
Shelter facilities	-2	→	-3	→	1320	69	16	15	72
Availability of seating	-3	→	-2	→	1411	57	19	24	58
How request to station staff was handled	4	→	7	→	211	93	2	5	90
Choice of shops/eating/drinking facilities available	-6	↓	-1	→	1193	44	20	35	43
Availability of Wi-Fi	0	→	6	→	634	28	12	60	42
TRAIN FACILITIES									
Overall satisfaction with the train	-4	↓	0	→	1456	66	19	15	74
Frequency of the trains on that route	-5	↓	4	→	1436	66	13	21	74
Punctuality/reliability (i.e. the train arriving/departing on time)	-5	↓	8	↑	1455	72	8	20	77
Length of time the journey was scheduled to take (speed)	-5	↓	5	↑	1462	79	12	9	85
Connections with other train services	-6	↓	3	→	870	71	19	10	75
Value for money of the price of your ticket	-2	→	1	→	1407	55	15	30	55
Upkeep and repair of the train	-2	→	-1	→	1452	58	18	24	66
Provision of information during the journey	0	→	4	→	1323	64	21	15	70
Helpfulness and attitude of staff on train	-2	→	1	→	1101	79	16	5	77
Space for luggage	2	→	4	→	1074	64	16	20	63
Toilet facilities	2	→	10	↑	640	51	18	31	47
Comfort of the seats	-1	→	-2	→	1427	57	20	22	65
Step or gap between the train and the platform	-3	→	1	→	1372	58	26	15	61
Your personal security on board	-3	→	1	→	1355	73	22	5	76
Cleanliness of the inside	-3	→	0	→	1466	64	15	21	69
Cleanliness of the outside	-1	→	-2	→	1312	61	24	15	65
Availability of staff on the train	-3	→	0	→	1308	61	22	17	60
How well train company deals with delays	-2	→	9	↑	345	40	38	22	41
Usefulness of information about the delay	-4	→	7	→	337	41	30	30	44
Level of crowding	-3	→	2	→	1446	71	14	15	73
Reliability of the Internet connection	3	→	7	↑	569	28	11	60	39
Availability of power sockets	4	→	2	→	653	16	7	77	31

Drivers of overall passenger satisfaction

Some of these declining factors are also important in driving passenger satisfaction, particularly punctuality and reliability and length of journey which, along with cleanliness of the inside of the train, are the top three most significant influences on overall experience.

In the diagram below, the size of the circle denotes relative importance of the top six drivers of satisfaction, so the biggest is the most important driver. The figures within are the percentage of passengers satisfied with that aspect of the journey.



Building block variations are also notable across the Northern network. The North East and East building blocks score better on many aspects, particularly on important performance and information factors, whilst the Central and West perform worse. This indicates considerable difference in the passenger experience in certain areas.

Building Block/ route data for Northern

	West	North East	East	Central
Overall satisfaction with the journey	68	83	83	77
STATION FACILITIES				
Overall satisfaction with the station	76	82	80	78
Ticket buying facilities	82	78	76	74
Provision of information about train times/platforms	82	84	85	83
Upkeep/repair of the station buildings/platforms	73	76	69	67
Cleanliness	76	76	73	72
Toilet facilities at the station	40	47	44	46
Attitudes and helpfulness of the staff	78	81	78	77
Connections with other forms of public transport	75	72	68	70
Facilities for car parking	60	65	61	44
Facilities for bicycle parking	81	76	62	59
Overall environment	73	79	72	74
Your personal security whilst using the station	75	76	65	73
Availability of staff at the station	75	63	61	68
Shelter facilities	69	75	73	63
Availability of seating	58	71	61	48
How request to station staff was handled	96	87	92	93
Choice of shops/eating/drinking facilities available	39	54	50	38
Availability of Wi-Fi	26	48	29	24
TRAIN FACILITIES				
Overall satisfaction with the train	63	69	71	61
Frequency of the trains on that route	66	72	70	60
Punctuality/reliability (i.e. the train arriving/departing on time)	64	82	79	67
Length of time the journey was scheduled to take (speed)	76	83	83	76
Connections with other train services	78	81	75	60
Value for money of the price of your ticket	52	69	58	50
Upkeep and repair of the train	53	55	63	55
Provision of information during the journey	62	70	70	55
Helpfulness and attitude of staff on train	86	84	82	68
Space for luggage	66	60	72	53
Toilet facilities	59	43	53	43
Comfort of the seats	50	57	65	50
Step or gap between the train and the platform	55	72	64	50
Your personal security on board	72	76	78	66
Cleanliness of the inside	64	66	66	62
Cleanliness of the outside	59	58	66	55
Availability of staff on the train	61	79	72	43
How well train company deals with delays	32	52	51	32
Usefulness of information about the delay	36	60	49	34
Level of crowding	70	80	76	63
Reliability of the Internet connection	29	35	34	19
Availability of power sockets	17	23	18	10

There is a wealth of further detail about passenger experience available from the NRPS. A copy of the spring 2019 train operating company report will accompany this paper[1]. NRPS scores are also tracked on an ongoing basis across the Northern network and published annually on the Transport Focus website, providing a public statement of passenger experience as part of a transparent reporting suite[2].

Trust

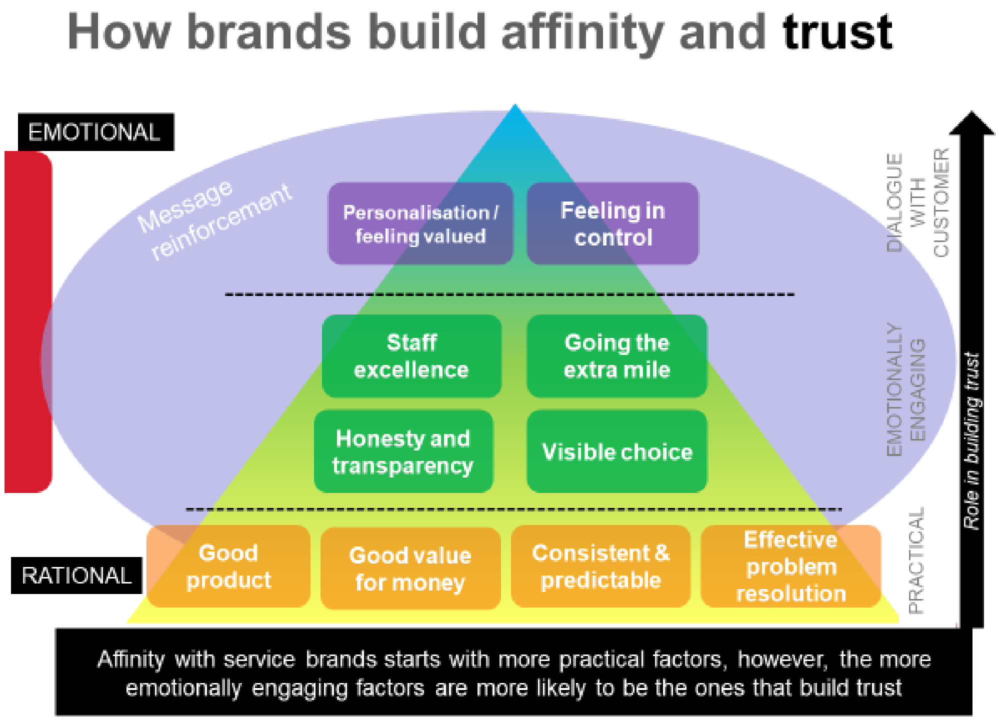
Transport Focus first investigated the issue of trust in the rail industry in 2014[3]. We found that the best performing train companies all had relatively high levels of trust

[1] In January 2020 the latest NRPS scores for Autumn 2019 were published: https://d3cez36w5wymxj.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/27181442/Main-Report-Autumn-2019-240120.pdf

[2] https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/northern-customer-experience-survey-2018-19/

[3] https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/passengers-relationship-with-the-rail-industry

and low levels of distrust. From this report Transport Focus developed a hierarchy of customer needs that underpinned feelings of trust.



The report concluded that improving the reliability of services was key to improving overall levels of trust in an operator but that doing this alone would not be enough. To really unlock the potential requires additional focus on communications, giving passengers a greater voice - and a much greater emphasis on transparency - giving them the information they need to hold train companies to account.

What drives trust?

Our research identifies three different aspects of trust:

Trust in Competence: *punctuality/reliability* is the single most important hygiene factor overall; if this isn't right then trust just isn't possible. The central importance of punctuality/reliability chimes with other Transport Focus research where punctuality is a key driver of passenger satisfaction with their journey and features strongly in passenger priorities for improvement[4].

Trust in Motive: provide passengers with a sense that the train company is looking out for them (and not purely driven by commercial goals)*: treating customers fairly, on my side* and *communicating well* can all help drive up levels of trust.

Trust in Judgement: passengers are also looking at the overall judgement of train companies: are they *truthful*, do they *act with honesty and integrity*, do they have

[4] https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/rail-passengers-priorities-for-improvement/

high principles and a *good reputation.* People look to all these things to gain a sense of whether, or not, a train company is trustworthy.

Taken together, the most significant drivers of trust suggest that delivering a reliable, dependable service, providing a sense that a train operating company is looking out for their customers and creating a positive sense of their overall judgement make the biggest difference in how passengers perceive the trustworthiness of an operator.

Building trust in a train company can therefore be regarded as a careful balance of:

- Doing what is supposed to be done – by getting people where they want to go, safely, at the time they expect to get there
- Showing care for customers – demonstrating a human sense of treating people well and fairly
- Being seen to have ethics and principles – being a ‘good’ company that has a strong moral compass.

NRPS trust scores – Northern lagging

We first added a question on trust to our survey of passenger satisfaction – the National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS)[5] in spring 2017. We now have the start of a coherent, ongoing record of passenger trust scores and how they are moving, and the ability to explore this complex issue more meaningfully.

In the most recent NRPS results for spring 2019, statistically significant falls in trust have been recorded for Northern and TransPennine Express. TransPennine Express has dropped 11 percentage points to 43 per cent and Northern has fallen from 41 to 35 per cent.

It is also instructive to consider the proportion of passengers who state they ‘do not trust’ the operator they travelled with. In spring 2019 seven operators have ten per cent or more of their passengers recording a lack of trust. These are Northern (16 per cent), Great Northern (15 per cent), Southern and South Western Railway (both at 14 per cent), Thameslink (12 per cent), Gatwick Express (11 per cent) and Southeastern (10 per cent).

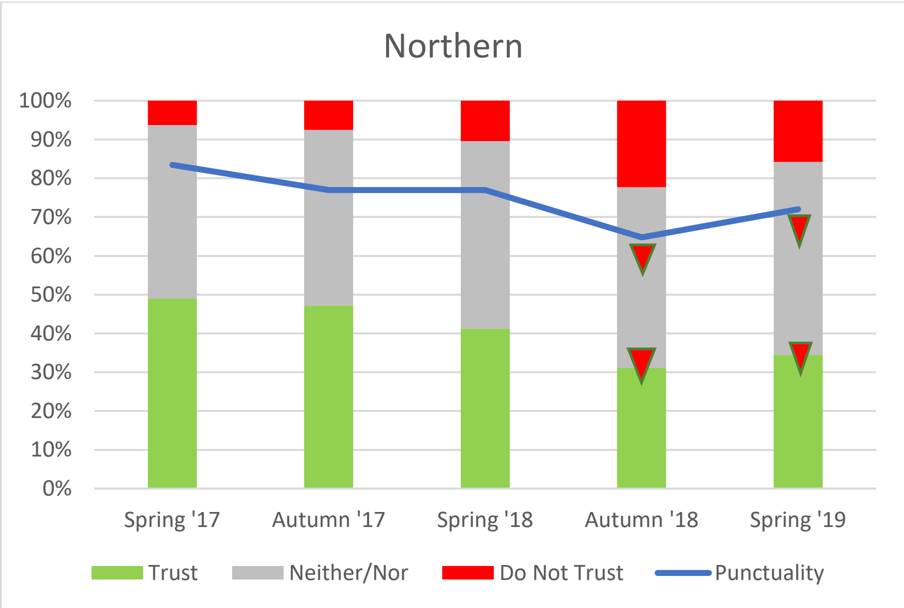
[5] https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/research/national-passenger-survey-introduction

Regional Train Operator Trust Scores - Spring 2017 to Spring 2019

NRPS wave	Spring 2019		Autumn 2018		Spring 2018		Autumn 2017		Spring 2017	
Train operating company	Trust	Do not trust	Trust	Do not trust	Trust	Do not trust	Trust	Do not trust	Trust	Do not trust
TFW Rail	39	9	43	9	45	12	46	10	47	7
Merseyrail	64	3	65	3	65	3	65	3	69	2
Northern	35	16	31	22	41	10	47	8	49	6
ScotRail	41	13	42	11	47	9	48	4	48	5

Northern trust and punctuality and reliability scores

The chart below illustrates the Northern trust scores alongside satisfaction with punctuality and reliability over the five National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS) waves between spring 2017 and spring 2019.



Key:	Scores are shown as percentages and data is rounded to nearest whole number
▲	Indicates statistically significant increase since comparable wave in preceding year. Tested for Autumn 2017/2018 and Spring 2018/2019
▼	Indicates statistically significant decrease since comparable wave in preceding year. Tested for Autumn 2017/2018 and Spring 2018/2019 Spring 2018

Next steps for Northern franchise and industry partners

Industry must work together

Performance is the hallmark on which the next franchise will be judged. The issues across the North require a whole industry solution. In making decisions about short-term interventions it is vital that the balance of needs is considered, along with alternative options and practical mitigations where service changes are implemented.

From crisis intervention to medium and longer-term decisions, there must be clear communication with passengers and stakeholders. Where there are options for consultation the choices must be clearly set out, with enough information for passengers to understand the impact on their own and other services. Explanations must be sufficient for people to grasp why options are presented and, ultimately, selected.

There will also be the need to manage change that follows welcome investment. The TransPennine Route Upgrade will be one such challenge requiring industry to manage significant disruption and communicate effectively to gain passenger support. Expectations and concerns will need to be addressed well in advance of works commencing.

Northern actions – needed now

The immediate priority for Northern, as the one element the operator can take immediate control, should be communication and transparency.

A mini-audit of information on the current website is revealing. Information is out-dated, incomplete and apparently marketing driven rather than passenger led. The tone is not responsive to the poor image in the public and stakeholder environment.

Additionally, a ramp up of real-time information provision, improved and consistent on-station communication channels across the network and pro-active alerts to passengers who have registered journeys is needed.

An appropriate campaign to restore and build trust needs to commence at a point when passengers have some sense that services are becoming more punctual and reliable.

Emphasis to on-train and at-station environments would improve passenger perceptions of care for their travelling experience. Staff should be supported and encouraged to maintain positive and helpful attitudes to passengers, taking pro-active action where this may be necessary.

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